INTERCULTURAL INQUIRY WITH PRE-SERVICE EFL TEACHERS

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Abstract

Cultural extension in the intercultural digital era has amplified the importance of effective interpersonal communication among culturally different interlocutors, and this mainly aims to evade misunderstanding that may eventually lead to conflict. Indeed, professionals, businessmen and even ordinary people work to develop long-term economic, social and cultural relations with other cultural groups, yet global instability still threatens the world. Therefore, strengthening the skills required to encounter intercultural connections is becoming increasingly important at all levels, especially in education. Language educators are called upon to help learners assess their cultural and social differences and practices as community members. They are also required to guide students to accept and value otherness. In this sense, language educators should promote reflective environments where students can reflect upon culture and cultural diversity; they need to be open-minded and neutral agents who construct cultural experiences with students. Accordingly, this paper evaluates our English as a Foreign Language (EFL) pre-service teachers' readiness, as would be teachers, to develop their learners' intercultural competences. To conduct this research study, the researchers used online questionnaire as a primary tool to collect relevant data from 35 EFL pre-service teachers at Oran Higher School of Teachers. In a nutshell, this study highlights the importance of intercultural competence for teachers and learners in the age of globalization and diversity.

Keywords: Pre-service teachers, cultural diversity social differences, language educators, learners' intercultural competences

1. Introduction

Today, the ever-globalized world, which is characterized by mobility, hybridity, cultural diversity and virtual porous borders, imposes the navigation of novel communication skills and strategies. As such, the increasingly global and intercultural connections require language teachers to integrate the cultivation of intercultural competencies into their instructional goals.

This research is an attempt to address the subject of intercultural dimension in the process of educating student-teachers who will be able to support their future learners in the formation of desired attitudes and behaviours in their relations with individuals of different linguistic, national, ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In this context, to better conduct this research study, we have formulated the following leading research question:

To what extent are pre-service EFL teachers prepared to incorporate the intercultural dimension in their future classes?

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The researchers hypothesised that pre-service EFL teachers are aware of intercultural competence and its role in educating 21st-century learners, but they are not equipped with pedagogical approaches to integrate the intercultural dimension in their foreign language classes.

2. Literature Review

This section elaborates on the construct of intercultural competence and discusses how it can be developed in educational settings through language teachers' guided instructions.

2.1 Intercultural Dimension in Foreign Language Teaching

When speakers of different languages communicate in a lingua franca, they are fully conscious of each other's national identity. It often influences the way they interact with each other (what and how to say it) because they perceive their interlocutors as representatives of a country or nation. In other words, the reliance on national identities and the stereotypes that derive from them reduces the complex nature of human beings with their own individuality to representatives of a particular culture with an externally assigned identity. This simplification presumes that learning a language involves becoming like a native speaker who uses language appropriately and is knowledgeable about all aspects of its culture. In contrast, the essence of the Intercultural Dimension in foreign language teaching is to develop learners as intercultural speakers who can confront various identities and avoid stereotyping that lead them to perceive their interlocutors through a particular attributed identity (Byram et al. 2002)

It is hoped that language learners, who become intercultural speakers, will succeed in communicating information and developing a human relationship with people from other languages and cultures.

2.2 Intercultural Competence

Intercultural competence (IC) remains a difficult concept to define because of the abstract nature of its proposed constituents. All intercultural theorists concede that IC involves the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with speakers of other languages and cultures. Effectiveness in communication refers to the achievement of the valued objectives, and appropriateness can be achieved by avoiding violating the valued rules. IC is mainly linked to four dimensions: knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. Beyond these correspondences, there exist a number of differences among the models and conceptions (Deardorff, 2006). However, discussing these differences is a task that goes beyond the scope of this paper; thus, as an alternative, more emphasis will be put on how IC can be developed and on language teachers' role in intercultural education.

2.3 Developing Intercultural Competence

Before viewing the main pathways for developing IC, it is worth mentioning that all forms of intercultural education are grounded in some principles. The first principle is that challenging the existing beliefs, values and behaviours of learners is unavoidable in developing their IC (Paige, 1993; Talkington et al., 2004).

The second principle is that developing critical cultural awareness is highly required in teaching IC (Talkington et al., 2004). Furthermore, it is maintained that teaching the most overt forms of culture is not enough and that self-teaching is essential to develop IC, with the point of contact being the examination of various worldviews and cultural self-awareness (Bennett, 2009),i.e., learners should not only have to accumulate cultural knowledge and facts about any culture but also to question it. IC can be roughly developed through *intercultural training, learning at school and visits abroad.* Intercultural training has

mostly been concerned with the training of adults whose job necessitates interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds.

The most commonly used instructional methods in intercultural training are lectures, culture assimilators and class discussions; and the duration of the training programs ranged from a couple of hours to 50 over a period of up to 8 months (Mendenhall et al., 2004). These programs have been demonstrated to enhance knowledge but not necessarily to change behaviour and attitudes, and thus, need to more effectively address these dimensions (Mendenhall et al., 2004). Another way to promote intercultural understanding among university students could be to study abroad (Kitsantas & Meyers, 2001). The extent of the change has been associated with students' goals (Kitsantas, 2004) and with the length of the stay; the longer students are immersed within a culture, the more their intercultural sensitivity develops (Olson & Kroeger, 2001).

Developing IC can also take place in a primary or secondary school or higher education. In educational settings, instruction for IC can be taught in academic subjects like foreign languages or social studies. Foreign language teaching is designed to expose students to a variety of texts and cultural representations to develop their critical understanding of the cultural aspects of the language and cultural representations (Byram &Feng, 2004).

Kinginger et al. (1991) maintained that promoting an intercultural stance entails a critical understanding of both culture and language as culture and an awareness of self and identity. Yet, theorists argue that experiential learning about culture is more effective than learning that is confined within a classroom (Byram & Feng, 2004). In the past, the interaction between learners and native speakers of a language would have generally required travel; however, the advent of web-based technologies has facilitated such interactions without the need for travelling, mainly in educational contexts (Byram & Feng, 2004).

2.4   The Role of Language Teachers in Intercultural Education

The main aim of the intercultural dimension is not the transference of cultural information about a foreign country, it is concerned with helping learners to understand what is involved in intercultural interaction, how social identities are displayed in such interactions, how interlocutors' perceptions of each other influence the flow of communication, how they learn more about the people with whom they are communicating. So language teachers do not need to know everything about the target culture; instead, they are appealed to aid learners in valuing their own cultural and social differences and practices as members of a community. They are also required to instruct students to accept and appreciate the other (Perry & Southwell, 2011). In this sense, language teachers should foster reflective environments that help students reflect on culture and cultural diversity. They need to be open-minded and neutral agents who construct cultural experiences with students.

In Algerian educational institutions, pre-service teachers' training should take into account the intercultural dimension in language teaching because pupils enrolled in Algerian schools mostly speak the same language 'Arabic' or speak various dialects, and they use English as their foreign language and share the same cultural background. Furthermore, they are often exposed to cultural diversity through internet-based communication tools. Consequently, pre-service teachers should be aware of developing the required competencies of 21st-century individuals to help students mature their IC to be engaged in virtual intercultural encounters- -not within their classes like in multilingual countries, viz. Europe and USA.

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4   Research Methodology

4.3 Context

Drawn from teacher education classes offered in fall 2019, a total of 35 EFL pre-service teachers at Oran Higher School of Teachers (henceforth OHST) participated in this research study.

4.4 Participants

Participants were pre-service teachers enrolled in their fourth year at OHST to become practising middle and secondary school teachers of the English language. They were taken from both genders, and their age ranged from 21 to 24-years- old.

4.5 Procedure

To achieve the research objective and answer the main research question, we adopted a descriptive case study as a research design to conduct this investigation. In order to examine the readiness of EFL pre-service teachers at OHST to integrate the intercultural dimension in their teaching, we submitted an online questionnaire to 35 participants.   The online questionnaire included mainly open-ended questions to collect relevant data about the intercultural understanding of teacher training and their viewpoints towards education.

5   Results and Discussion

Pre-service teachers were asked whether they considered themselves intercultural speakers and why to check their understanding of the concept of IC. 80% of respondents referred to IC as the ability to interact with people from other cultures and accept their difference; the remaining 20% related IC with the world language (English) and its cultural knowledge. Regarding the necessity of being an intercultural EFL teacher as a requirement in instructing learners to develop their IC, 70% of the participants did not mention the teacher's role in intercultural education, only highlighted the importance of IC in the age of globalization and how it assists learners to be open-minded, while 30% of the informants stressed on teachers' IC as being compulsory in developing the IC of their students. Furthermore, when it comes to value the teaching of IC in Algerian schools, 85% of pre-service teachers argued that they should balance between language competence and IC, whereas 25% of participants prioritized the learning of the four skills than IC, they also believed that IC could be developed at later stages.

With regard to pre-service teachers' intercultural training, 60% of respondents claimed being exposed to cultural diversity in oral expression sessions or literary lectures (through a descriptive approach), while the rest reported that there was no intercultural communication training included in their teacher education program. Also, all participants mentioned that they experienced meaningful encounters with people from other cultures in the virtual world and not in the real world.

To check pre-service teachers' readiness to teach intercultural communication, they were asked about the *How*. In fact, 90% of participants listed many methods and/or teaching materials they would use to create opportunities for students to understand and experience other cultures, namely: the use of visual aids, videos on YouTube, authentic materials in the classroom, reading about other cultures, or through interaction with speakers of other languages on social media. Finally, informants listed different ways to help learners avoid misunderstanding of communication by highlighting the different norms and principles that

are part of a given cultural group, explaining cultural behaviours and what results from misleading acts, avoiding bias, developing a critical spirit and accepting others worldviews.

6 Conclusion

The present paper targeted the issue of intercultural education in the teacher training program at OHST. It aims to examine pre-service teachers' willingness and pedagogical preparedness to integrate the intercultural dimension in their teaching. The research findings indicated that most pre-service teachers are knowledgeable about and aware of the importance of IC in the age of globalization and cultural diversity. However, as reported, many participants did not receive intercultural training during the teacher education program. They were only exposed to the cultural aspects of the target language through descriptive teaching materials. Participants are also aware of the teaching materials that can help them create opportunities for learners to understand and experience other cultures, but not about teaching instructions that help increase their awareness of cultural differences and how to position themselves against the target culture. In conclusion, this study attempts to more effectively target the issue of intercultural education as part of the teacher training program in Algerian Higher Education.

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